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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ANKARA 000773

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/04/2027

TAGS: PGOV PREL TU

SUBJECT: TURKEY: PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION WINDOW ABOUT TO OPEN

REF: A. ANKARA 629

1B. ANKARA 588

Classified By: Political Counselor Janice G. Weiner, for Reasons 1.4 (b ,d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: Turkey's presidential election process officially begins April 16. Despite months of tail-chasing by the political classes, Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan's enigmatic silence on his own candidacy has frustrated pundits and opponents alike, while serving gradually to acclimate the country to the idea of an AKP candidate. While the tea leaves indicate a real possibility that Erdogan will not stand for the presidency, he has not ruled it out and the mystery of who will run if he does not remains unsolved. END SUMMARY.

12. (SBU) Turks may have to wait even longer than expected to learn the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) candidate. When the election window opens on April 16 -- the first 10 days of which are for registration of candidates -- Erdogan will be in Germany. The AKP reportedly will introduce its candidate on April 18, following the Executive Board's Central Decision-making Committee meeting. Aksam and Cumhuriyet dailies suggest Erdogan may delay the announcement even longer, in order to avoid interfering with the April 23 National Sovereignty and Children's Day holiday. All candidates must be registered by midnight on April 25. (For the election schedule, ref A.)

13. (C) The last few weeks have seen a surge of internal AKP consultations, as Erdogan takes the pulse of his party on the presidency. Papers report that the PM will be receiving MPs in groups to survey their preferences. On April 11, he is scheduled to hold a meeting with AKP mayors and women and youth auxiliary representatives. He is reportedly convening AKP provincial chairmen in Ankara next week and will ask members to stand behind the party's candidate, whoever it might be.

14. (C) Opponents to an Erdogan candidacy are desperate to catalyze some last minute opposition (ref B), so far without much success. In mid-March, with about 90 NGOs already on board, Middle East Technical University Alumni Association (METUAA) declared their intent to bring together over 500 NGOs sharing deep concerns about efforts to "superimpose" a candidate rather than elect one through

social compromise. METUAA's red-and-white ribbon campaign -- signifying opposition to an Erdogan presidency -- has achieved little visibility. Two rallies planned for the pre-election period are intended to pressure Erdogan not to run. This week, Erdogan responded sharply to rumors (since denied by the rector) that Inonu University in Malatya has postponed exams to permit student participation in the rally on April 14 organized by the Ataturkist Thought Association.

¶ 15. (C) Other developments might damage Erdogan's image or give the impression the AKP's grip on the country is slipping: the publication of a retired admiral's alleged diaries that disclose a 2004 coup plot; accusations that the PM respectfully referred to PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan as "Mr. Ocalan" in a 2000 interview; and a wave of arrests of the pro-Kurdish Democratic Society Party (DTP) (which both creates the appearance of and invites a more acute security situation). An unannounced dinner hosted by President Sezer for senior Turkish General Staff and force commanders on March 21 fueled speculation that the defenders of the secular state had gathered to discuss the presidential election. These developments have thus far failed to trigger spontaneous, organic protests that might signal more active public opposition to (or interest in) particular presidential candidates.

¶ 16. (C) Should the AKP field a candidate besides Erdogan, the person's identity will be a surprise. The rumor mill continues to process the same pool of names (ref A). Most observers predict AKP will draw from its parliamentary group or cabinet, but an unknown professor or bureaucrat from AKP circles is also possible. The debate over Erdogan's candidacy has served as a lightning rod for other potential candidates. Virtually any other AKP candidate

ANKARA 00000773 002 OF 002

will be less controversial than he; indeed, AKP might calculate that a non-Erdogan candidate could bring a sense of relief to the rather tense political environment.

¶ 17. (C) COMMENT. Erdogan's recent interest in internal party democracy is at odds with his increasingly authoritarian and centralizing tendencies of the past few years. He has maintained notable control over and silence within the party over AKP candidates in the lead-up to the election. His latest consultative approach may well be his way of laying the groundwork for a graceful exit from the presidential debate, should he so choose. By consulting extensively -- and allowing party officials to voice their reservations -- Erdogan may be developing a credible alibi to fend off the inevitable opposition taunts of cowardice that would come from not running. Whether or not he runs, the inability of Erdogan's opponents to generate mass opposition is daily more apparent. Keeping the candidate list a mystery to the last minute is keeping the rumor mill spinning but may also be a clever way to pre-empt opposition. END COMMENT.

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